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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BAGHDAD 003252

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SUBJECT: RRT ERBIL: MEETING WITH ALI BAPIR, LEADER OF THE KURDISTAN ISLAMIC GROUP

REF: BAGHDAD 1580

Classified By: Classified By Jess Baily, Regional Coordinator for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

This is an Erbil Regional Reconstruction Team (RRT) message.

¶1. (C) SUMMARY. The Kurdistan Islamic Group (KIG) claims to be a moderate Islamic party operating throughout the Kurdistan region. It actively recruits youth and students and supports the rule of Sharia law. The KIG leader blames the secular mass media, regional government, and party structure for the injustice and corruption that increasingly pervades all facets of society. He also believes the United States should differentiate between moderate Islamist parties and Islamic extremists, exercise greater cultural sensitivity in the Iraqi environment, and uphold the very human rights it trumpets. Additionally, the KIG seeks the release of one of its members allegedly held by MNF-I. The meeting provided little new information on KIG policies, but the arguments raised by the KIG align with the notion that the two dominant Kurdish parties are not fully prepared to deal with political opposition in democratic ways. They also reveal that the KRG's frustration with the dominant Kurdish political parties has carried over to the USG, whose image has suffered some erosion among opposition and youth groups since 2003. END SUMMARY.

BACKGROUND

¶2. (C) On September 15, IPA met with Mamousta Ali Bapir, leader of the Kurdistan Islamic Group (KIG) at his office in Erbil, following up on a previous meeting (reftel). Bapir was arrested in 2003 by US forces and spent 22 months in prison, which he chronicled in "Torture and Prison," a signed copy of which he gave IPA. Bapir was cordial yet keen to assert that in 2003 the US failed to see he was part of the opposition to Saddam Hussein. Bapir said he was pleased Saddam was removed from power because of the suffering he had caused the Kurds.

KIG PRESENCE

¶3. (C) Bapir estimated the KIG has 100,000 members, six of whom hold seats in the Kurdistan National Assembly (KNA) and one in the Iraqi National Assembly. The party has nine centers and five sub-centers operating throughout the Kurdistan Region and Kirkuk. Bapir said the KIG follows an Islamic tradition that is neither Salafi nor Sufi and is moderate politically and in its interpretation of Islamic thought.

¶4. (C) Bapir said the KIG maintains relations with the other political parties in Iraqi Kurdistan. It was unclear if this went beyond dialogue to collaboration. Bapir distanced himself from the policies of the recently deceased IMK (what's the IMK?) leader Ali Abd Al-Alziz Halabji. (Note:

Bapir is a former member of the IMK.) The KIG receives an unspecified small monthly payment from the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK). Bapir complained the KIG does not receive funding from the KNA. (Note: Other parties have made similar complaints. Yet a recent press report noted that the KIG receives about 120,000 USD per annum from the KNA. End note.)

SOLICIT THE YOUTH AND STOP THE CORRUPTION

¶15. (C) Bapir said that, like the Kurdistan Islamic Union, the KIG pays particular attention to youth and students. The problem in Iraqi Kurdistan is the lack of spiritual development for youth which Bapir attributes to government, dominant political parties, and a secular media.

¶16. (C) Bapir told IPDAO that corruption was the biggest problem facing the KRG and if Sharia law were established, it would prevent leaders from using public office for private gain. The Islamic tradition, he continued, requires officials at all levels to declare their income sources -- a practice that would promote transparency in public spending.

MESSAGES TO THE US

¶17. (C) Regarding what the USG should understand about the KIG, the Kurdistan Region, and Iraq, Bapir made the following statements:

-- The US killed 43 KIG members and injured 100 others in 2003 in Khor Mal. This made the KDP and PUK feel they had license to arrest KIG members and close its offices when the Americans arrived and removed Saddam. The PUK and KDP continue to attack the KIG

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as Islamists in the name of the US. There are prisoners in Iraqi Kurdistan who await charges and are held and tortured because of their Islamic faith. Therefore, neither the Kurdish parties nor the US protect the basic human rights of KIG members.

-- Whether the US remains in Iraq or withdraws its troops, there will be problems and the US should pressure the KRG to allow more freedom to opposition groups.

-- The US should differentiate between moderate and extremist Islamist parties. There are no significant Islamic extremists in the Kurdistan Region, although the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) and Party of Free Life of Kurdistan (PJAK) pose a danger and should be disarmed. Bapir did not consider Al-Sar al-Sunnah and Al-Sar al-Islam a "major" threat.

(Note: After 2001, members of IMK left to form these terrorist groups which are linked to Al Qaeda. End note.)

-- The US does not grasp the Iraqi mentality and cultural context. For example, it lacks cultural sensitivity when military or private security details interact with the general population, enter homes and offices with guns, and visit female quarters. (Note: This conversation occurred before the media attention involving Blackwater security. End note.)

-- In its relations with Iraq, the US should exercise morality commensurate with its superpower status. When the US mistreats others, this only strengthens the cause of insurgents and terrorists who work to weaken US influence.

-- The USG should invest in the Iraqi public educational system, not just private schools catering to the wealthy. (Note: This comment refers to the International School in Erbil and the American University in Sulaimaniyah; the USG supports the latter while the former is the brainchild of the KRG Prime Minister).

ASSISTANCE REQUEST

¶ 8. (C) The KIG would like an explanation for the detention by US forces of Jumha Mohammed Ahmed. He was taken into custody on August 12, 2007 near Baghdad and was in possession of 600,000 USD. The KIG supports the release of Mr. Ahmed, who they claim legitimately collected this money from KIG members for currency exchange and ordinary purchases in Baghdad. IPAO replied that she would convey the message but made no other promises.

COMMENTS

¶ 9. (C) Like other Islamist party leaders, Bapir complains the US does not recognize the positive contribution of his party out of deference to the PUK and KDP. US support to the KRG and the dominant parties gives them license to abuse the rights of the opposition and minority parties and squeeze them out of the political process. The KIG does not want to lose the younger generation who are critically-minded and yearn for more economic prospects than the PUK and KDP are delivering.

¶ 10. (C) Although the meeting provided little new information on KIG policies, the arguments raised align with the notion that the two dominant Kurdish parties are not fully prepared to deal with political opposition in democratic ways. The KDP and PUK are perceived as unwilling to listen and debate. Some of this frustration with the KRG carries over to the USG, whose image has suffered some erosion among opposition, civil society organization, and youth groups since 2003.

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